



CITY OF EAST LANSING

The Home of Michigan State University

Ladies and gentlemen of the subcommittee, my name is Bob Pratt, I'm the Fire Marshal for the city of East Lansing. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak with you today regarding H.B. 4473. While I have several issues with this bill, I will limit my comments to fire related issues and will forward the other concerns in writing, please add the written comments into the record.

As Fire Marshal a portion of my duties include the inspection of residential properties. I am very concerned that if this bill were to become law, fires in my city would increase, the magnitude of those fires will be worse and those fires may result in fatalities. Fire departments across the state struggle to meet the inspection needs of our communities. As a result, we must rely on help from other sources. Our housing inspectors are a tremendous asset they are the city's first responders in the inspection process. They are a set of eyes and ears that have the ability to directly impact the safety of our citizens on a daily basis. East Lansing's Fire Prevention Bureau consists of myself and one inspector. We investigate the cause and origin of fires, review building plans for new construction, do community education programs and inspect properties for compliance with fire codes. Unfortunately, we cannot inspect all of our rental properties I wish we could. I fear if this legislation passes we will be forced to begin a fire inspection program in these properties, we would of course be forced to pass the cost of this program on to the property owners.

East Lansing has several full and part-time housing inspectors who are in **all** of our rental properties yearly. In 2003 (our 2004 data is not completed yet) these inspectors reported 457 electrical problems, 336 missing or defective smoke detectors, 240 blocked or substandard means of escape and 166 issues with hazardous materials. These numbers represent literally hundreds of potential fires that are prevented each and every year. If inspections were reduced to once every three years how many of these violations would result in fires?

I'd like to focus on a single item that the inspectors look at: smoke detectors. It's one of the most common violations our inspectors see. We know that a working smoke detector doubles your chances of surviving a residential fire. We also know that nationally one third of all detectors fail to operate, the most common reason is missing or

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dead batteries. In the city of East Lansing, we know the number of non-working detectors is higher. I've conducted an inspection where 31 of 33 detectors had been disabled. The situation is so serious that we have amended the fire code to mandate special detectors {detectors that have a sealed battery} in many occupancies.

Last month there were six fire fatalities at colleges across the country. A twenty – two year old senior died in a fire at College Park Maryland, the cause is under-investigation. A student at Penn State died in an off campus fire, disabled smoke detectors played a part in this fire. At Southern Adventist University in a dormitory, the alarms functioned properly but the student failed to evacuate. And tragically three students died in a fire at a rental house at Miami of Ohio, multiple smoke detectors were disabled. The Center for Campus Fire Safety has recently identified three commonalities of fires in college communities: careless disposal of smoking materials, alcohol use and missing or disabled smoke detectors. One of the reasons we have avoided a similar tragedy at Michigan State University is an effective inspection program, housing inspectors reduce the number of missing in disabled detectors by the hundreds.

One of the problems with prevention activities is how do we measure events that didn't happen? I can tell you how many fires occurred last month in East Lansing, but I can't tell you how many fires were prevented. A good PR person would argue “we prevented **ALL** of the other fires”.

Here's one story illustrating how important our rental inspections are. This is 532 Ann Street a large rooming house {picture attached}. Following a routine housing inspection my office was contacted about the fire hazards: no fire alarm, missing and disabled smoke detectors and lack of fire extinguishers -- problems our inspectors see all the time. It took several months to bring the property into compliance. On November 7, at 10:00 p.m. a dryer vent plugged with lint (which by the way was one of the things our inspectors noted at a previous inspection) caused a fire {picture attached}. The newly installed hard-wired smoke detectors set off the house's fire alarm system and alerted residents on the third floor who used the extinguisher (missing during the previous inspection) and put the fire out. Above the dryer was a battery-operated smoke detector with a missing battery (also noted at a previous inspection). Had this fire occurred six months earlier the resulting fire would have been very different, and may have been the first fatal fire of a Michigan State student in over 15 years.

Part of this bill would limit the cost of an inspection to the actual inspection time. Please carefully consider how this would cripple our inspection program. With

respect to 532 Ann street, following the housing inspection (which lasted about an hour) my office was contacted, reports were generated, meetings were held with the owner of the property, we met on several occasions with contractors who were making the corrections. Not including travel time, secretarial time, costs of training and certification and the time spent at an inspection is just the tip of the iceberg.

The bill calls for the disclosure of those making complaints. Unfortunately, we have several landlords who would use this information improperly; we have recently convicted a landlord of threatening eviction of tenants for complaining to the city. As a side note; the time spent providing a copy of the complaint, copy costs , postage etc. would not be billable.

The bill defines a "child" as an individual under 18 years of age, I would suggest you exclude emancipated minors or it will become a scheduling nightmare, we would need to identify and prioritize inspections by the age of the occupants something we don't currently track.

Your definition of a "Violation" would allow a single violation for a property that had **all** of their smoke detectors disabled, and **all** of their exits blocked.

Many of our citizens are living unsupervised for the first time in their lives -- their cooking, housekeeping and fire safety skill and knowledge is limited. We routinely find missing, defective and purposely disabled fire protection equipment. We find people living in locked closets, basement and attics.

College students are young, inexperienced and bulletproof. They feel "It can't happen to them." Many of our residents live in rental housing for a single year or two. Under this legislation their property may never be inspected while they live there. Would you send your loved one to live in such a property?

Rarely a week goes by that I'm not contacted by one of our inspectors bringing to my attention a matter that requires immediate attention. If this legislation passes it will cut by 66% a very important and very effective safety program.

If we are forced to reduce our inspections to once every three years how many detectors will be disabled, how many fire extinguishers will be missing when they are needed the most? Will Michigan State join the list of colleges with fatal fires? Our effective inspection program saves lives, Please do not hamstring our efforts.

This bill is aimed at college communities and you may not have a college town in your district but I can assure you, there are sons and daughters, nieces and nephews and grandchildren of your constituents at our University communities. They're counting on you to protect their loved ones please do so by rejecting this bill.

Thank you.

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